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From Ceremonial to Strategy: The Yang di-Pertuan Agong speech and policy agendas in Malaysian Governance

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Abstract

This paper applies the policy agendas approach to examine the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's speeches to the Parliament (2000-2014), authored by the elected government as statements of intended policy priorities. It asks: Which issues gained or lost significance? When did policy punctuations occur, and on what issues? How stable has the policy agenda been, and to what extent is it fragmented? By tracing shifts in these speeches, the study identifies patterns of change in Malaysian policy agendas, offering more profound insights into the dynamics of governance and contributing to a broader understanding of Malaysian politics.

Keywords: Policy Agenda; Political Discourse; Governance

1.0 Introduction

The policy agenda is the list of subjects or problems to which society pays serious attention at any given time (Kingdon, 1984; Gasik, 2022). Some agendas caught the attention and transformed into government agendas, while others did not. Having been thoroughly investigated through both theoretical and empirical research, agenda-setting looks at the subjects that gain prominence on the policy agenda as well as the underlying causes of this phenomenon (Banhrach & Baratz, 1962; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Downs, 1972; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kingdon, 1984; Schattschneider, 1960; Gasik, 2022). The Policy Agendas Project (PAP) enhances this initiative by aggregating and structuring data from public sources to delineate alterations in the national governmental policy agenda. It began in the US and involved coding most aspects of the presidential and congressional agenda and policymaking since 1900 using a standardised codebook. It has gained favour in comparative studies and includes more than 15 jurisdictions within its ambit (Gibbons & Evans, 2023; Dowding & Bosworth, 2021).

This paper represents the first application of the policy agendas method to the study of Malaysian politics. The changing pattern of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong's (YDPA) speeches to the Malaysian Parliament has been analysed from 2000 until 2014, especially during Barisan Nasional's time in government. Although the speech is ceremonial, its government-drafted content enables the executive to use the occasion strategically to set the tone of national priorities and signal its policy agenda, and while speeches are generally non-partisan affairs, but for political reasons, a government may nevertheless decide to downplay the significance of a policy announcement (Dowding

et al, 2013; Yang & Zhou, 2024). However, the government must choose which issue to prioritise in this speech, and the length of time devoted to each issue can be seen as a measure of its importance to the government. Thus, changes in speech content provide a simple measure of changes in the executives' policy agenda on entering or re-entering office.

2.0   Literature Review

The policy agenda comprises the set of issues that, at any given time, are in the public eye, discussed in the media, or promoted by pressure groups (Kingdon, 2013). Some of these issues reach the government's agenda, while others are neglected. Studies of policy agendas trace the levels of attention to issues within government over time. These studies typically follow the history and development of policies over long periods, seeking to explain the causes and/or consequences of their rise or fall on the government agenda. Agenda-setting studies examine which issues are included on the policy agenda and vice versa, and reveal the reasons behind these inclusions. It has been the subject of extensive theoretical and empirical research (Banhrach & Baratz, 1962; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Downs, 1972; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kingdon, 1984; Schattschneider, 1060; Yang & Zhou, 2024). In the 1990s, a more ambitious research programme gathered momentum, seeking to address the limitations of detailed information about the content of policy agendas, particularly in the United States of America. As a result, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) found that dramatic policy changes were generally associated with heightened government attention to an issue, or increased attention within a policymaking venue that had previously not been involved.

Baumgartner and Jones' Agendas and Instability in American Politics (1993) was the origin of the Policy Agendas Project (PAP). In response to a clear need for better measurement of key concepts in the study of public policy, Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner initiated the PAP, which began to address an inability of scholars and policymakers to trace changes in policy activity within particular policymaking areas across more extended periods of time. PAP runs on a sentence; longitudinal data on policy agendas from various sources to examine policy change (John, 2006; Dowding & Bosworth, 2021). One of the most important questions Baumgartner and Jones sought to answer related to public policy in the United States is whether a stifling stability of decision-making characterises the political system, or if there is a potential for policy change and the invasion of new groups and public opinion. By examining the character of agendas in various policy sectors, Baumgartner and Jones discovered that the policy process is marked by both stability and transformation, with their novel assertion being that the institutions which often hinder agenda change can, at specific periods, facilitate it (John, 2006; Dowding & Bosworth, 2021; Brasil & Bichir, 2022).

PAP has generated a rich set of easily accessible data, which, because it employs a consistent method of coding and a standardised set of defined policy codes, can be utilised to assess the progression of the policy agenda throughout time and countries (Mayer, 2021; Dowding & Hindmoor, 2013). Without reliable measures of the occurrences of various comparable policymaking activities across time, policy academics were unable to systematically evaluate the degree of change in activities between different time periods (Bulut, 2019). Consequently, the PAP developed a coding scheme utilising 22 major topics and 225 subtopic codes. Codes are allocated according to policy content and are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. All activities are categorised, and each item, such as a congressional hearing, is assigned one and only one category.

Together with the data, PAP has produced impressive sets of case studies that chart the rise and fall of attention in particular areas and how attitudes change due to framing, the activities of pressure groups and policy entrepreneurs or due to changing circumstances (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Gibbons & Evans, 2023; Casey, 2025). According to Dowding and Bosworth (2021), one of the significant claims of PAP is that policy agendas around the world do not change gradually but are subject to periods of stable attention punctuated by periods of increased attention. This is usually described as punctuated equilibrium (Gibbons & Evans, 2023; Casey, 2025). Among the suggested reasons of PAP on why the policy agenda has this structure are bounded rational nature of human activity, exogenous and endogenous shocks, the slow build-up of problems that changes drastically and require strong attention, the framing of issues by policy entrepreneurs who also might seize opportunities afforded by frictional effects or exogenous shocks and party competition over the agenda (Baumgartner, 2011; Dowding & Bosworth, 2021; Casey, 2025).

Therefore, within this comprehensive agenda-setting framework, the speeches of the YDPA constitute a crucial yet underexplored source of policy indicators. Despite being formally non-partisan and ceremonial, these royal addresses, crafted by the government, serve as a distinctive tool for the executive to express policy priorities, signal changes in governmental focus, and contextualise topics during pivotal occasions (Gibbons & Evans, 2023). Utilising the PAP approach, as discussed in the methodological section, enables a systematic tracing of which issues are elevated onto the national agenda and a broader understanding of Malaysian politics.

3.0   Methodology

In the case of executive speeches, such as those of the YDPA, quasi-sentences that constitute a single expression of a policy idea or issue are coded (Gibbons & Evans, 2023). The process began with the selection of a coding framework suitable for the case study. For this study, 22 principal policy codes used within PAP are employed in analysing the policy content of the YDPA's speeches. An additional category, code 99 (others), is utilised for policy statements that do not fall under any of the principal codes, such as youth, sport, and religions practised in Malaysia, as reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: The 22 Major Policy Codes on Policy Agendas Project

1.	Macroeconomics	13.	Social Welfare
2.	Civil Rights, Minority Issues and	14.	Community Development Planning and Housing Issues

	Civil Liberties		
3.	Health	15.	Banking, Finance and Domestic Commerce
4.	Agriculture	16.	Defence
5.	Labour, Employment and Immigration	17.	Space, Science, Technology and Communications.
6.	Education and Culture	18.	Foreign Trade
7.	Environment	19.	International Affairs and Foreign Aid
8.	Energy	20.	Government operations
10.	Transportation	21.	Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues
12.	Law, Crime and Family Issues	99.	Others

(Source: Topics Codebook, Policy Agendas Project (2014),

All the speeches by the YDPA from 2000 to 2014 were compiled from the Malaysian Parliament Hansard and prepared for analysis. Next, each speech was blind-coded at the quasi-sentence level by the researcher to ascertain whether any given statement contained policy content and to assign the corresponding major policy code and sub-policy codes to each statement. To ensure the robustness of the analysis, each speech was double-coded independently by two researchers. This step minimises subjective interpretation and ensures consistent application of the coding scheme across speeches and time periods. This technique of double coding led to 95% inter-coder reliability for most years (Gibbons & Evans, 2023; Cased, 2025). Any discrepancies between the two coders were examined collaboratively to ensure accuracy and consistency. Through discussion, consensus was reached on the most appropriate code for each disputed quasi-sentence, ensuring accuracy and methodological coherence in the final dataset. After all discrepancies were resolved, the final coded dataset was compiled. This dataset provides the empirical foundation for analysing issue attention, policy emphasis, and agenda dynamics in the YDPA's speeches.

4.0 Findings
The YDPA's speech has always been delivered at the opening of a new Parliament Session every year since independence. The Malaysian Parliament will have three terms each year and come into session every four months. However, the YDPA will deliver His speech during the first term every year except for 2003 and 2013, when the speech was delivered in June after the 13th General Election. Between 2000 and 2014, fifteen speeches were delivered by four YDPA under three Prime Ministers from Barisan Nasional, the governing party.

4.1 The Structure of the YDPA Speeches from 2000 until 2014
The basic structure of the YDPA's speech has remained essentially unchanged from 2000 to 2014. The speeches started with routine greetings and a paean to the democratic process, and when appropriate, to a recent and tragic national or international event. As an example, Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin ibni Al-Marhum Tuanku Syed Putra Jamalullail in 2004, Al-Wathiqu Billah Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Mahmud Al-Muktafi Billal Shah in 2008 and Almu'tasimu Billahi Muhibbuddin Tuanku Al-Haj Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah in 2013 have inserted the congratulatory remarks for the success of Barisan National to remain as a government in Malaysia. Meanwhile, in 2014, Almu'tasimu Billahi Muhibbuddin Tuanku Al-Haj Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah's speech included sad remarks due to the tragic disappearance of MH370.

The speeches were followed by congratulatory remarks on the government's past achievements. Furthermore, the speeches then summarise the government's priorities before discussing each item on this list in detail. Essentially, the YDPA's speech follows a similar structure to those made by the head of state in many countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. These speeches have been used as a source of information about the direction and changes in the executive's policy agenda.

The government used this medium to set the tone for itself, laying out a radical new set of priorities or reaffirming its previous priorities. It is also used to appeal to a specific section of the electorate in response to issues that have arisen, perhaps in the run-up to and during the election campaign. Some issues might be overemphasised in the speech to indicate interest or priorities, while others are almost ignored. This is because, as political documents written by elected officials, they may not only reflect policy priorities but also political ones (Dowding et al., 2011; Gibbons & Evans, 2023). Additionally, the government can utilise the executive's speeches to establish the tone of the national debate. Overall, even if the speech might serve a variety of strategic objectives that may not align with the incoming government's intentions, it will at least reflect some of them, such as the YDPA's speech in Malaysia.

4.2 Number of Statements and Policy Statements in the YDPA Speeches from 2000 until 2014
Figure 1 illustrates the cumulative count of statements and policy statements from 2000 to 2014. The total number of statements is slightly higher than the total number of policy statements because each speech contained several very general statements, such as a general greeting or a paean to the democratic process, which were irrelevant to the code.
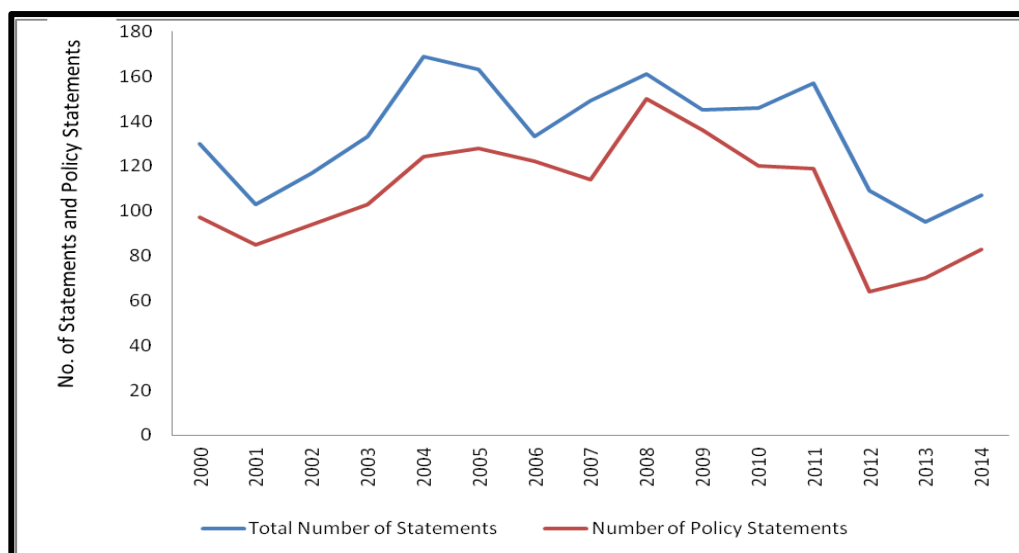
Figure 1: Number of Statements and Policy Statements in the YDPA's Speeches from 2000 until 2014

The total number of statements in the YDPA's speeches is 2010, with an average of 134 statements. Meanwhile, the policy statement for all 15 speeches is 1620, with an average of 108. There were more policy statements in His Majesty The King Al-Wathiqu Billah Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Ibni Al-Marhum Sultan Mahmud Al-Muktafi Billal Shah's 2008 speech as compared to His Majesty The King Almu'tasimu Billahi Muhibbuddin Tuanku Al-Haj Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah's 2012 Speech. This is attributable to the 12th General Election that occurred prior to the delivery of the YDPA's speech in 2008. The speech was used not only to inform the public about the turns and trends in the government's actual policy agenda, but also to reflect the tone that a government wants to set at the beginning of its new term in office.

4.3 Which Policy Issue has risen or fallen in importance?
After knowing the total number of statements and policy statements in the YDPA's speeches, the next step is to map the overall shape of a government policy agenda in each speech. Since the speeches are of different lengths, the importance of each issue is not the amount devoted to it per se but the proportion of the speech it consumes (Dowding et al., 2011; Gibbons & Evans, 2023).

Thus, after coding the content of each speech, the attention devoted to each of the 20 principal policy codes was reassessed as a proportion of the total speech. Figure 2 shows the total result for this process for each code from 2000 to 2014.
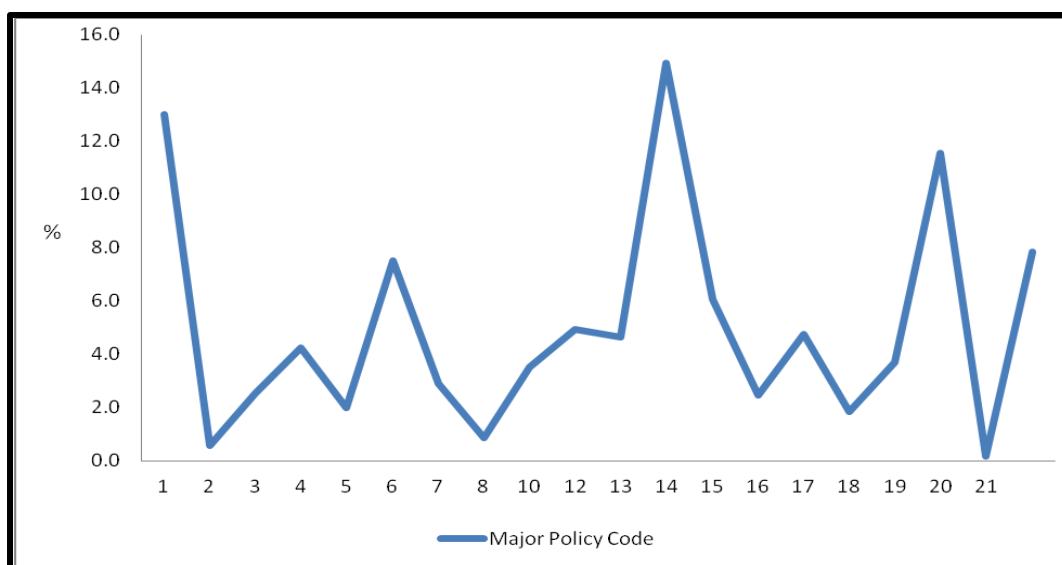

Figure 2: Proportion of Attention to Major Policy Code in the YDPA's Speeches, 2000- 2014

The distribution of the government's stated policy priorities since 2000 shows a distinct focus on three main areas, as shown in Figure 2. Social welfare is the most significant policy area, accounting for 14.9% of the policy agenda. This demonstrates how the government has consistently prioritised tackling problems like social safety nets, poverty alleviation, and public assistance. Macroeconomics, which emphasises the importance of economic growth, fiscal stability, and overall economic governance

in determining national policy orientations, comes in second (13%). The importance placed on administrative effectiveness, institutional reforms, and the internal operation of the state apparatus is demonstrated by the third area, government operations (11.5%).

On the other hand, several policy areas received relatively little attention. Public land, water management, and colonial and territorial issues were among the least prioritised (0.2%). Despite their potential long-term significance, these issues have been overlooked in the broader policy discourse. Similarly, only 0.6% of policy priorities were related to civil rights, minority issues, or civil society, indicating a lack of government attention to participatory democratic processes and rights-based governance. Last but not least, the energy sector only received 0.9%, suggesting that energy-related issues were not given top priority in the policy agenda during the reviewed period. These findings suggest a governance trajectory in which social protection, economic management, and bureaucratic operations assume a central role in policymaking, while rights-based, environmental, and energy-related issues are relegated to the background.

The findings also highlight three major trends: areas with constant government attention, areas with increasing government attention, and areas with minimal government attention. Firstly, the areas that received constant attention include 1) macroeconomics, 2) education and culture, 3) community development, planning and housing issues, 4) banking, finance and domestic commerce and 5) others, which consist of youth, sport and religion. Secondly, with increasing attention covered 1) macroeconomics, 2) labour, employment and immigration, 3) health, 4) defence, 5) environment, 6) social welfare and 7) space, science, technology and communication. Finally, the trend that stands out from the findings is regarding public lands, water management, colonial and territorial issues, which were devoted the least attention by the government.

5.0 Discussion

Public policy-making is intrinsically linked to governmental actions or inactions and the overarching effects of governmental decisions on the policy agenda. Measuring the agenda stability over time is not a straightforward exercise. Therefore, what are we finding here?

Overall, the policy agenda in Malaysia remained stable from 2000 to 2014. It cannot be denied that the Barisan National government played a vital role in shaping the content of the YDPA's speeches from 2000 to 2014. As mentioned earlier, the government-drafted content enables the Barisan Nasional government to use the occasion strategically to set the tone of national priorities and signal its policy agenda. The success of Barisan National in maintaining its power as a government during that period gave it the advantage to ensure the stability of policy agendas from 2000 to 2014, despite facing challenges such as the American-Iraq War in 2003 and the global economic crisis in 2008. This provides significant advantages for Barisan National in effectively strategising the necessary orientations to achieve substantial public support.

Another point of interest in the YDPA's speeches is the presence of Almu'tasimu Billahi Muhibbuddin Tuanku Al-Haj Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah ibni Almarhum Sultan Badlishah's speeches from 2008 and 2013. In this speech, there are statements to reassure that the government will give more focus to social welfare and forge a 'new consensus'. This statement was included due to the diminished seat possession of Barisan National in the general election. This policy statement serves as a friendly reminder to the public regarding the impending changes in the Barisan National administration, which are ultimately aimed at garnering their support.

Finally, the YDPA's speeches from 2000 to 2014 have not deviated significantly from those of previous years. Whilst the speeches allude to a large number of issues, the Prime Minister and their team concentrate their attention upon just one or two topics. Nonetheless, the speeches of the YDPA serve as an indication of the government's focus on the specified topics. A speech by the YDPA that focuses on one or two issues indicates that the government's attention is directed towards those specific matters. If it encompasses a variety of concerns, the knowledge it includes is diminished.

The findings of this study yield several implications beyond the analysis of the YDPA's speeches from 2000 to 2014. First, the stability of Malaysia's policy agenda underscores how prolonged political dominance, such as Barisan Nasional's, can maintain agenda continuity even during external shocks, highlighting the need for future agenda-setting research to consider the structuring effects of incumbency in dominant-party systems. Second, the strategic deployment of royal speeches during periods of electoral decline demonstrates that ceremonial institutions can serve as subtle tools of political communication, warranting a broader investigation into how non-partisan constitutional actors are utilised to manage legitimacy and signal policy shifts. Third, the gap between the broad issues mentioned in speeches and the government's narrow substantive focus emphasises the need to distinguish symbolic agenda-setting from actual policy priorities. Finally, the successful application of the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) to royal speeches demonstrates its wider potential for studying other political texts in Malaysia, encouraging further research on parliamentary debates, budget speeches, ministerial statements, and party manifestos to deepen understanding of policy attention in a hybrid political system.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Malaysia's policy agenda remained broadly stable between 2000 and 2014, reflecting the long-standing dominance of Barisan Nasional and its ability to influence the content of the YDPA's speeches for strategic signalling. However, the analysis is limited by its reliance on a single source of political text and on the PAP coding framework, which, although systematic, may not fully capture the nuances of symbolic language or implicit policy cues. To improve the robustness of future findings, researchers could incorporate additional data sources, such as parliamentary debates, ministerial statements, or even interview key persons responsible for the speeches, to triangulate agenda priorities more comprehensively. Further research should also explore how ceremonial institutions function as instruments of political communication, how agenda stability shifts under conditions of political turnover, and how the PAP approach can be expanded to study policy dynamics in evolving hybrid political systems, such as Malaysia's.

Acknowledgement

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper enables the PAP approach to travel beyond its existing context of Western liberal democracies, as this study has explored the policy agenda in Malaysian governance through the YDPA's speeches in the parliament. By tracing shifts in these speeches, the study had identified the patterns of change in Malaysian policy agendas, offering more profound insights into the dynamics of governance and contributing to a broader understanding of Malaysian politics, besides adding more rigour towards the literature in the related field of study.

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